

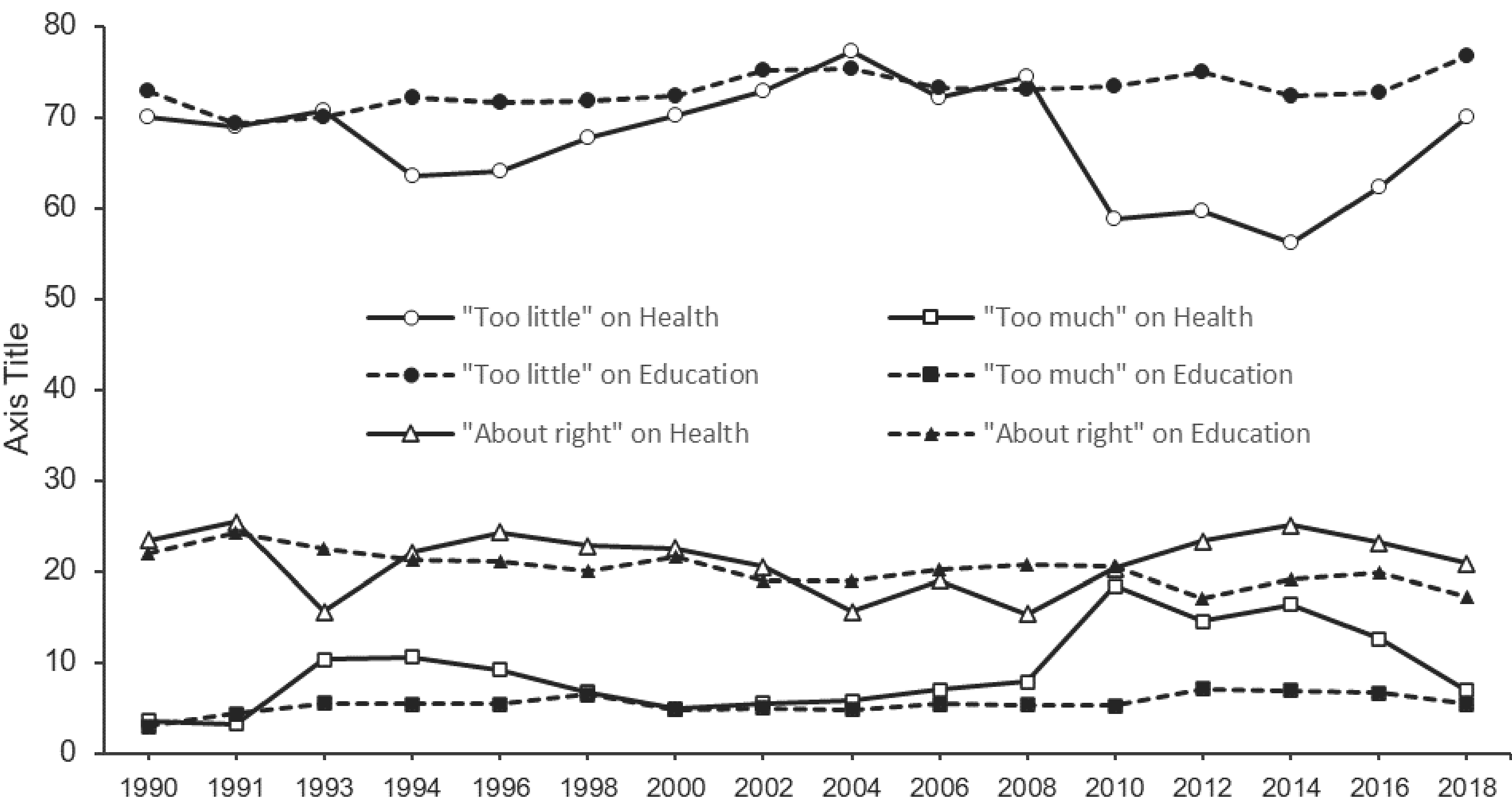
Analysis of Public Opinion on Social Welfare Programs in the United States

Abstract:

Political platforms on social welfare issues that directly affect the lives of millions of citizens can make or break a candidate's campaign for office. Therefore, it is important to view and understand public opinion towards these programs. Not only the general public's attitudes, but the attitudes of specific sub-groups as well, such as political affiliation, ideology, age, gender, race, religion, education, and class. The opinions of sub-groups have important implications for how candidates will campaign on social welfare issues and how policymakers will shape public policy regarding welfare programs. This paper will both summarize and analyze datasets of public opinion since 1990 on government spending on various social welfare programs both by sub-group and the public at large, as well as explore how public opinion affects public policy. My conclusion holds that the general public steadily favors a larger role and spending by the government on social welfare. Numerous Americans are exhausted by the unmitigated costs of goods such as health and education which most democratic nations essentially offer as human rights; so much so that outspoken socialists such as Sen. Bernie Sanders and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have received unprecedented amounts of popularity and favorability.

Health

FIGURE [1] Public opinion on the level of spending by the American federal government on Health and Education, 1990-2018



Trends on government spending on health and education, two of the most salient areas of welfare among citizens, reveal a good portion of information:

- Favorable opinion on spending for health had been steadily increasing from the first quarter of the Clinton administration until a noticeable drop around 2009-10.
- Analysis shows that the drop was likely due to Barack Obama's election and proposal of the Affordable Healthcare Act which passed in 2009.
- Data from NORC/GSS shows that in 2010, upper and middle-class citizens were three times more likely than the lower class to feel that the government was spending too much on healthcare, and two times more likely than the working class to feel the same way.
- Another drop experienced in 2014 when enrollment was mandated. Since then however, support for government spending on health has rapidly increased to the levels it once had before the Obama administration. Also important to consider is the activism by the Sanders campaign in 2016 and 2020 for making healthcare a human right.
- Among the most content with the current level of spending on healthcare according to the same data sets controlling for different variables were white males over the age of 65 who identified as Republican.

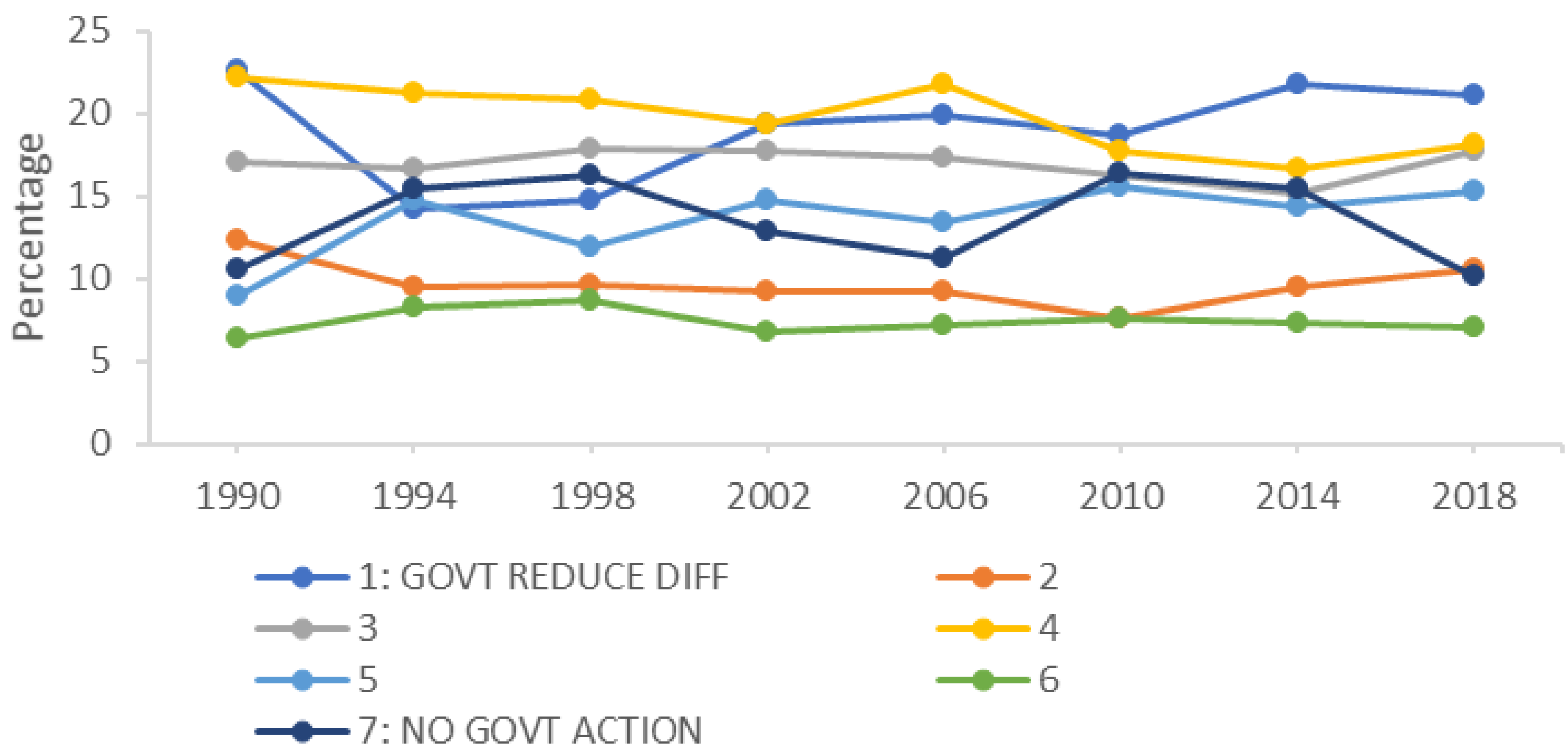
Education

The cost of higher education has rapidly increased over the last thirty years. According to the NCES, the average cost of all higher educational institutions rose from \$10,893 to \$23,091 (all prices adjusted for inflation) between 1985 and 2017. This has made college increasingly cost-prohibitive for numerous Americans while yielding the same benefits, if not less benefits depending on the degree field entered. Despite this, attitudes on government spending on education have remained quite constant with the vast majority of Americans wanting increased spending.

- As one might expect, Americans who have less than a complete high school education are 12% less likely on average to support more government spending on education compared to those with a high school diploma or college degree.
- Overall, a very high percentage of Americans favor more spending on public education, with women leading in support and understandably so considering there are more women going to college now than at any other time in our history.
- As with healthcare, the progressive fight for government-paid-for education is more prevalent now largely due to the Sanders campaigns. He remains the voice for youth.

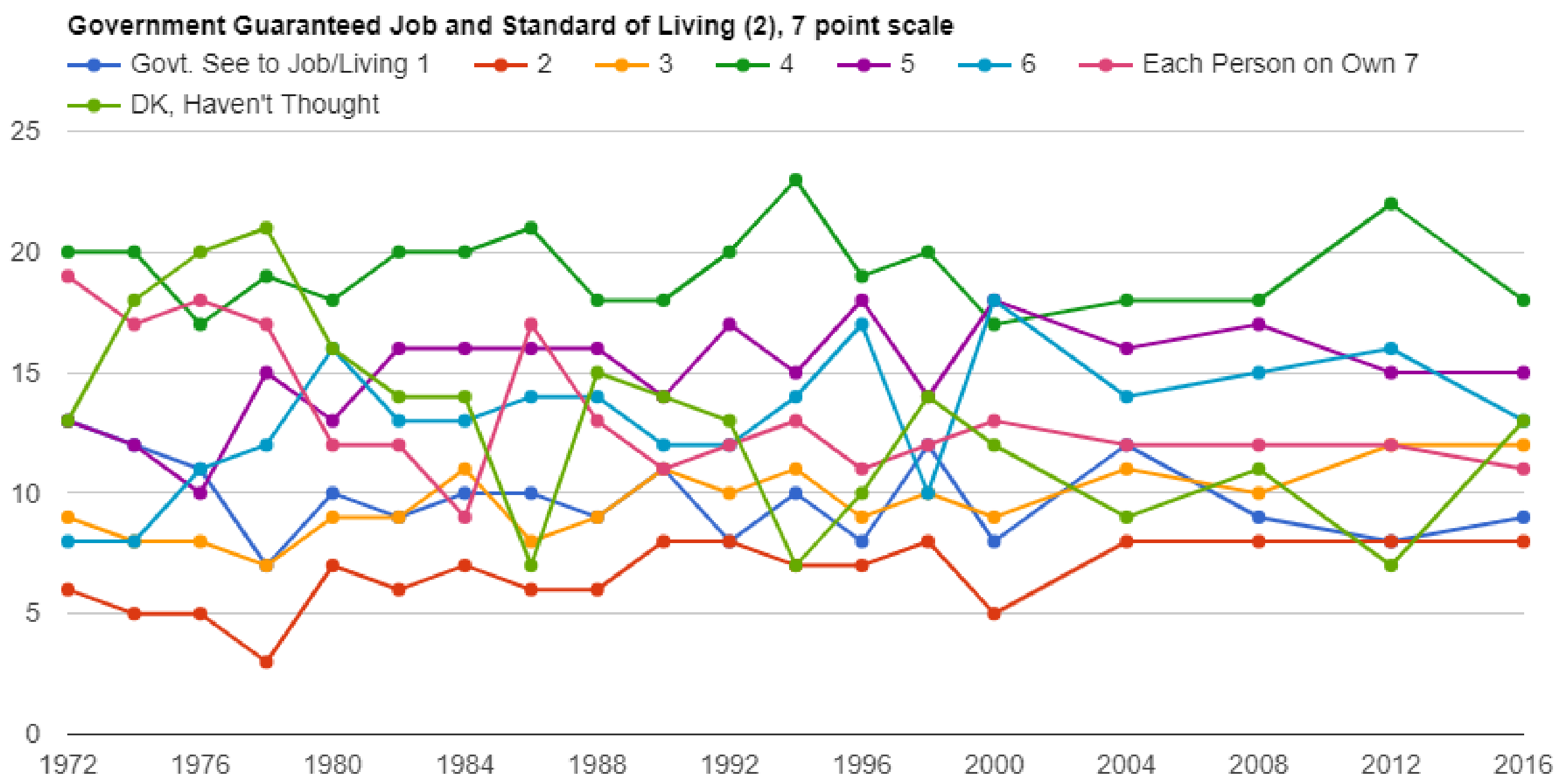
Jobs and Inequality

FIGURE [2] Do Americans feel that the government should have a role in ameliorating wealth inequality?



In more recent years, the American public has increased its favorability for government to reduce income differences. While income inequality was certainly still rampant in 1990, the public did not see the government as responsible for ameliorating wealth inequality as evident by Figure [2]

- Increased levels of income inequality and wage stagnation has taken place in every year since the 1970s.
- The presence of wealth inequality itself heavily influences American's opinion on social welfare programs.
- Interestingly enough, despite public opinion wanting government to ameliorate income inequality, they are much less in favor of government-provided jobs. The figure below from ANES reveals a much higher average of Americans leaning toward each person to be on their own. One may suggest this is a product of American individualism that is still highly present in society today.



Citations:

- Figure [1] NORC/GSS ("Don't Know" excluded as the percentages were never greater than 4%) Question: "... are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on (ITEM)? G. Health; Education
- Figure [2] sda.berkeley.edu - Quick Table: GSS 1972-2018 Cumulative Datafile Results: Govt. Reduce Income Differences
- Figure [3] The ANES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior - Government Guaranteed Job and Standard of Living (2), 7 point scale 1972-2016
- All claims on data in the *Health* and *Education* sections retrieved from GSS/NORC.

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